

Committee on Foreign Affairs: State Department Records Undercut Senate Republican Smear and Reveal Origins of Russian Disinformation Campaign

Today, Senate Republicans released a report trying to breathe new life into a debunked conspiracy theory dealing with a Ukrainian energy company, former Vice President Joe Biden, and his son Hunter. The intentions behind this report are plainly partisan. Chairman Johnson himself stated that his “investigation” would “help Donald Trump win reelection.”

This report restates a tired smear that ignored the real corruption in Ukraine in favor of a baseless political attack. If this sounds like a page out of Putin’s playbook, it’s because it is. From a small Crimean port town, to the presidential offices in Kyiv and Washington, to the United States Senate, Russia has been trying to push this baseless attack for nearly five years. Senator Johnson’s report is the imprimatur of purported respectability Russia has been seeking all that time.

But the story’s as phony now as it was five years ago.

After a months-long standoff with the State Department, the Foreign Affairs Committee finally obtained the State Department records that Secretary Pompeo provided to the Senate for this sham investigation. Nothing in the 16,759 pages supports the allegations Republicans have been making for months regarding former Vice President Biden. In fact, the documents show precisely the opposite: Vice President Biden was a fierce fighter against corruption in Ukraine, carrying out the clear policy of the United States government.

So what really happened?

Following Ukraine’s Revolution of Dignity and Russia’s military intervention in 2014, the Obama Administration, together with NATO allies and European partners, engaged the new Ukrainian government to stabilize Ukraine and deter further Russian aggression. Vice President Biden was the point person for implementing U.S. policy toward Ukraine, reinforcing the broader U.S. effort to push back against corruption, reform its criminal justice system, and hold accountable corrupt actors including, specifically, Mykola Zlochevsky, the owner of Burisma.

The records note that the Vice President’s son, a private citizen, took a board role at Burisma in 2014. But there’s not a single shred of evidence in the records produced by the State Department that he ever asked for, let alone received, any special treatment for himself or Burisma.

Burisma did hire U.S. lobbyists to represent the company and Zlochevsky. The records show that the lobbyists, though dogged, never accomplished their aim of changing the last administration’s view that their client was a corrupt oligarch.

Finally, these documents point to the specific origins of the Biden-Burisma conspiracy theory: a Russian disinformation effort launched in late 2015 by pro-Kremlin media.

In short, the simplest explanation is the correct one: the United States pursued a strong policy of encouraging Ukraine to reform and tackle corruption, including by prosecuting corrupt oligarchs such as Burisma’s Mykola Zlochevsky. And American officials, all the way up to the Vice President, carried out that policy in lockstep with one another.

Here’s what the records show about U.S. foreign policy toward Ukraine:

- After the 2014 Revolution of Dignity and Russia’s military aggression against Ukraine, the Obama Administration mounted a focused, consistent push to help the new Ukrainian

government. This included helping it tackle its longstanding corruption problem which left it vulnerable to Russian manipulation. In Washington and in Kyiv, in public and in private, the documents show a clear, consistent U.S. message: Ukraine must reform its justice system and appoint prosecutors who would go after the oligarchs who stole the country's resources and crippled its political institutions. U.S. officials emphasized—by name and repeatedly—that one of the oligarchs first on the list for prosecution should be Mykola Zlochevsky of Burisma.

- It wasn't just the Ukrainian government, with U.S. support and encouragement, that was turning its attention on Zlochevsky. The documents show that in the Spring of 2014, the United Kingdom's Serious Fraud Office froze Zlochevsky's assets. This isn't news – George Kent, then the number two official at the U.S. embassy in Kyiv, testified during the impeachment inquiry that “U.S., U.K., and Ukrainian officials” worked together on a case against Zlochevsky “because we had made a commitment to the Ukrainian government in 2014 to try to recover an estimated tens of billions of dollars of stolen assets out of that country.”
- In April 2014, Burisma's lobbyists, a U.S. company called Blue Star Strategies, sought meetings with Administration officials to discuss Burisma and Zlochevsky. Burisma also hired Hunter Biden to be “in charge of the Holdings' legal unit and [to] provide support for the company among international organizations.” Vice President Biden's spokesperson said at the time, “Hunter Biden is a private citizen and a lawyer. The vice president does not endorse any particular company and has no involvement with this company.” The documents underscore that the entire U.S. government, from the White House to the State Department to our Posts overseas, immediately clarified that Hunter Biden's private business dealings had nothing to do with U.S. policy toward Ukraine in general or Burisma in particular.
- Nothing in the documents indicates that Hunter Biden lobbied the Administration regarding Burisma. They do show that the Blue Star lobbyists got a handful of meetings with State Department officials over a period of two-and-a-half years from Spring 2014 through December 2016. On one occasion in 2016, the documents show that a State Department staffer who was preparing for one of those meetings sent an email noting that Hunter Biden was on Burisma's board. That email, however, was sent nearly a week after the meeting had already been confirmed. Hunter Biden did not attend the meeting, and there's no indication that his name was used to secure the Blue Star meeting in the first place.

And that's it.

Across more than 16,000 pages and more than two years of effort by Republicans in both the Senate and the House, including an intensive effort by Secretary Pompeo to put a finger on the scale of the Senate investigation after President Trump's impeachment, the documents show that a couple of Burisma lobbyists got a couple of meetings. **But what they didn't get was any change in the U.S. position toward Burisma, Zlochevsky, or corruption in Ukraine.**

Instead, the documents show U.S. officials repeatedly and consistently called out Ukraine for failing to prosecute Zlochevsky and Burisma, and for slow progress on anti-corruption reforms:

- When Ukrainian Deputy Prosecutor General Yarema closed the case against Zlochevsky around December 2014, George Kent met with Yarema's deputy in February 2015 and “scolded” him for doing so, demanding to know, “Who took the bribe and how much was it?” This was ten months

after Hunter Biden's appointment to Burisma's board.

- Seven months later, when the new prosecutor general Victor Shokin (who later became a close associate of Rudy Giuliani) had failed to take meaningful action on corruption, the documents show that then-U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine Geoffrey Pyatt gave a major speech on September 24, 2015. He called out Shokin by name for failure to go after Zlochevsky and Burisma, and even went a step further than George Kent had gone in February, calling for the prosecutors who closed the Zlochevsky investigation to be fired.
- Less than two weeks later, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Victoria Nuland doubled down on Ambassador Pyatt's message, telling the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in testimony that "the Prosecutor General's Office (PGO) has to be reinvented as an institution that serves the citizens of Ukraine, rather than ripping them off." She continued, "That means it must investigate and successfully prosecute corruption and asset recovery cases, including locking up dirty personnel in the PGO itself."

These repeated calls for prosecutions of Burisma and Zlochevsky happened a year and a half into Hunter Biden's tenure on Burisma's board. The documents contain not a shred of evidence that Hunter Biden tried to change U.S. policy on Burisma or corruption in Ukraine. **On the contrary, they make clear that the U.S., and Vice President Biden, were pushing for more accountability, not less.**

And what did that inspire? A Russian disinformation campaign against Joe Biden:

- The documents show that on the evening of December 5, 2015, U.S. Embassy officials in Kyiv noticed articles in Russian-language media highlighting Hunter Biden's role at Burisma and using that to undercut anti-corruption efforts that were being led by Vice President Biden. An article appeared that night on Podrobnosti.biz, entitled "The Ukrainian scam of the Biden family." Embassy officials quickly traced the article to "a junk website registered in Sevastopol," a city in Russian-occupied Crimea that hosts Russia's Black Sea Fleet.
- Hunter Biden had been associated with Burisma for a year and a half at that point, with no indication that he had tried to influence U.S. policy towards Ukraine or Burisma. So why was this story coming up now? The records provide an answer, as embassy officials immediately flagged that Vice President Biden was travelling to Ukraine that same week to give an address to the Ukrainian Parliament. In that speech, the Vice President pledged America's support for Ukraine in its "historic battle against corruption." He urged, as other U.S. officials had done, the Prosecutor General's office, which was run by Shokin and refusing to prosecute Zlochevsky and Burisma "desperately needs reform. The judiciary should be overhauled."

So, just as the Vice President was giving the new Ukrainian government the public shot in the arm it needed to muster the political will to tackle corruption, including at Burisma, **the Russians began a whisper campaign trying to make it seem like all these reform efforts were a "scam." And they latched on to Hunter Biden as a convenient tool for that false narrative.**

But it didn't work—the records show that the entire U.S. government kept pushing tirelessly for anti-corruption reforms in Ukraine and didn't soften its stance on Burisma:

- Vice President Biden spoke repeatedly with then-President of Ukraine Poroshenko in 2016 about “the need to continue to move forward on Ukraine’s anti-corruption agenda.” And Vice President Biden echoed what Ambassador Pyatt and George Kent had been saying for months, ultimately pushing President Poroshenko to fire Viktor Shokin for refusing to prosecute people like Burisma’s Zlochevsky.
- In the end, the Obama Administration’s position never changed as a result of Blue Star’s lobbying efforts. In a December 2016 memorandum prepared for Ambassador Yovanovitch’s meeting with Blue Star officials, State Department officials summarized the meeting as follows:
 - *WHAT DO WE WANT?*
 - *You should hear [Blue Star’s] Tramontano out on Zlochevskiy’s situation, but not suggest we will change our posture on his case.*
 - *WHAT DO(ES) THEY/HE/SHE WANT?*
 - *Tramontano would like the USG to take a more positive view of Zlochevskiy and possibly meet with him.*

In sum, the records simply do not support the vague line of attack Republicans have used before, during and since the impeachment inquiry alleging impropriety by former Vice President Biden. Rather, the records show this attack had its origin in Russian propaganda, and it was designed to undercut the efforts of Vice President Biden and the entire US government to support anti-corruption efforts in Ukraine and prosecution, not leniency, for Burisma’s Zlochevsky.